First United Methodist Church
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John Buchanan

The Fox and the Hen

One of the best and most critically acclaimed motion pictures of our time was “Life is Beautiful,” a 1997 Italian movie directed by Roberto Benigni, who also played the lead – Guido, an Italian-Jewish bookseller with a Gentile wife and their son, a dear little boy, Giosue.

The movie begins in the 1930s as the Fascists begin to gain control of Italy and anti-Semitism begins to appear. When the Nazi occupation begins, Jews are rounded up, deported to concentration camps for extermination – including Guido and Giosue.

Guido comes up with a plan to prevent his young son from realizing the ugliness of what is really happening and perhaps to save him from the gas chamber. He persuades the little boy that what he is seeing all around him is an elaborate, complex game, the point of which is to hide from the German guards. The person who avoids them altogether is the winner and the grand prize will be a personal ride on a tank. The ruse works. The little boy trusts his father in spite of what he is seeing: as the number of children in the camp declines he believes his father who tells him they have found good places to hide.

As the American army closes in on the camp, the guards are determined to destroy any remaining evidence, including the last of the prisoners. Guido finds a safe place for his son, is caught and marched off by the guard – bravely mimicking the goose-stepping Gestapo for the amusement of his hiding son who is watching.

Giosue survives and as the camp is liberated, is reunited with his mother and receives his promised winner’s prize when American soldiers lift him up for a ride on a tank.

I’m a father, and the movie touched me deeply with its expression of one of the deepest human instincts, deep inside every one of us – to nurture and protect the children, to do what we must do, even if it means life itself – so they can live.

It is a theme that informs and runs through a small incident in the Gospel According to Luke in the midst of a powerful sequence of healing and teaching stories.

Jesus is on the way toward Jerusalem. Some Pharisees warn him that Herod – the Tetrarch of Galilee, the puppet king installed ands sponsored by Rome,

wants to kill him. Pharisees are much maligned but here they act with courage and sympathy for Jesus.

Jesus response is startling: “Go and tell that fox for me: Listen. I am casting out demons…I must be on my way.”

That was a bold thing to say about Herod, almost an expression of contempt for someone who had both the power and the means to do what he threatened to do.

Herod is a pathetic bit player in the grand drama of the Gospel. He’s the one who beheaded john the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin. Earlier in the story he is curious about Jesus who is going around Galilee, Herod’s jurisdiction, healing, attracting large crowds following him wherever he goes. Tyrants are paranoid about crowds they have not personally orchestrated. So the Galilean Pharisees, who certainly also knew about Jesus, have heard that Herod’s suspicion has turned into a plan to kill Jesus.

Herod will play a bit part in the last chapter of the story when Pontius Pilate, who wants to avoid making a decision about Jesus, sends him, under arrest, to Herod for questioning. It is Herod who mocks Jesus by placing an elegant robe on him. And it is in that interchange with Herod that Jesus shows his final contempt by remaining silent, refusing to answer Herod’s questions.

But, back to the conversation with the Pharisees and “Go tell that Fox.” He’s thinking about Jerusalem and invokes an odd and provocative image. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.”

The Fox and the Hen. A hen is virtually defenseless against a predator like a fox. All a hen can do, Barbara Brown Taylor says is fluff herself up and sit on her chicks and hope that she will satisfy the predator’s appetite sufficiently so that he leaves her babies alone. “How do you like that for an image of God?” Barbara asks. [See Bread of Angels p 123-127 “Chickens and Foxes.”]

You simply cannot read Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem and its children without thinking about our city and our children. It may seem like a stretch to go from Jesus’ lament to gun control and politics, but it is no stretch at all to hear in his lament a deep and passionate concern for the little ones, the most vulnerable ones among us, a clear moral imperative. The late John R. Fry, who served at First Presbyterian at the beginning of the gang drug and violence era in Chicago, used to say that all theology ought to be done from the perspective of a single mother living in poverty in an urban ghetto. Surely all ethics, all politics should be done from the perspective of the children, especially the children of poverty and racism. And, on that front we should be ashamed of ourselves, debating something as simple,

common-sensical, reasonable as background checks while the little ones continue to die. Jesus' lament is surely for them, for our city, for all of us.

We are in the second week of Lent and we remember Jesus moving steadily, with great intentionality and courage, toward Jerusalem, which is to say toward the seat of political, economic, social and religious power that will dispatch him as quickly as a fox deals with a defenseless hen. He will walk into the center of power, where the Roman governor himself has taken up residence, with legions of soldiers, to make sure no one misunderstands who has real power. He will walk into the political and religious heart of his nation and some of the people will welcome him with such exuberance that the real authorities will take notice and worry about insurrection. He walked toward his death as surely as a hen roosting in front of a fox.

Barbara Brown Taylor comments:

"The battle between the chicken and the fox turned out to be the cosmic battle of all time, in which power of tooth and fang was put up against the power of a mother's love for her chicks. And God bet the farm on the hen."

It's about the power of love, finally, the power of a love that overcomes the world –

Overcomes, that is to say, everything that threatens; our anxieties and fears, our uncertainties about the future, whether the job will hold out, whether the promotion will come through or the downsize, whether the test will come back positive, whether the news will be bad.

It's about a vulnerable, self-sacrificing love – that will overcome the world, will, finally overcome death, the last and most powerful enemy.

It's about a love that, in its self-emptying, self-giving, leaves us speechless, grasping for words to express our awe, our gratitude:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.